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Final Research Assignment

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What was the South’s reaction to the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* court case and what happened as a result?

In 1896, the United States Supreme Court case *Plessy v. Ferguson* ruled that separate facilities for separate races did not violate the Fourteenth Amendment ("no State shall... deny to any person... the equal protection of the laws.") if they were “equal.” Racial segregation was always part of American life up until the 1950s when an open battle against the racial segregation and discrimination arouse. This effort became known as the Civil Rights Movement and proved to be one of the nation’s longest and most difficult social struggles of the century. A major impact of this movement was the 1954 Supreme Court Case *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka.* This decision overturned the ruling in *Plessy v. Ferguson* and was an early step to desegregation. As a result, the South reacted in an extremely harsh and angry manner. This reaction came in the form of passive behaviors as well as violent actions which they called “massive resistance.” Due to the anger of the South and their harsh reactions, the ruling to the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case was delayed and not effective till years later.

May 17, 1945 was the day the Supreme Court announced its decision in the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* case. Thirteen Topeka parents on behalf of their twenty children filed against the Board of Education of the city of Topeka in the United States District Court for the District of Kansas. Oliver Brown is the man known for starting this battle against Topeka’s Board of Education. He had a daughter who was forced to walk one mile through a railroad switchyard every day just to get to her black elementary school, even though a white elementary school was only seven blocks away. Brown tried to enroll his daughter in the white elementary school, but the principal of the school refused (Mazzone 1). He then went to McKinley Burnett, the head of Topeka's branch of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) and asked for help. The NAACP recruited several other parents who were also refused enrollment and directed to the segregated schools. The NAACP requested an injunction that would forbid the segregation of Topeka's public schools. On October 1, 1951, Brown and the NAACP appealed to the Supreme Court. Their case was combined with other cases that challenged school segregation in South Carolina, Virginia, and Delaware (Littlejohn 1). Finally, on May 17, 1954, Chief Justice Earl Warren read the decision, “that in the field of public education the doctrine of 'separate but equal' has no place,” overturning the Court’s earlier decision in *Plessy v Ferguson* (Mitchoff 1)*.* As a result, segregation of schools in twenty-one states was ruled unconstitutional. This ruling, however, was not very popular in southern states who were enraged by the decision and started what they called “massive resistance.”

One form of the “massive resistance” response of the South was written/nonviolent behaviors. The most notable of these was the Southern Manifesto. Originally proposed by Senator Storm Thurmond of South Carolina and revised by senators Russell, Stennis, Fulbright, and Daniel, this document showed both the anger and resistance of the South (Littlejohn 3). Signers pledged to “use all lawful means” to “bring about a reversal” to the *Brown* decision. The document also said, “We commend the motives of those states which have declared the intention to resist forced integration by any lawful means” (Thurmond 2). Throughout the document, resistance was encouraged by using all legal actions. The White Citizens’ Council was also a nonviolent response to the case. It was formed in July 1954 by Robert Patterson, a plantation manager from Mississippi, and gained more than 250,000 supporters throughout the South within two years (Bollinger 1). It was a group of “white-collar, middle-class southern business leaders and professionals who used economic and legal means to discourage African Americans from pursuing court-ordered desegregation” (Barnhill 5). The angry southern reaction and disapproval of segregation was also showed in the mid-1950s political campaigns. Senator Byrd of Virginia condemned the Supreme Court’s school desegregation order. Governor Talmadge of Georgia claimed the Supreme Court had ignored precedent and overstepped the boundaries of its authority. Also, Senator Eastland of Mississippi portrayed racial segregation as a natural, self-evident truth saying “separation promotes racial harmony” (Williams 2). Each had different views, but all were against segregation. Also, if the federal courts ordered desegregation, governors could simply cut funding for the school, which they often did (Bollinger 1). Lastly, pupil-placement acts were often passed requiring African American students to complete applications, tests, and in some cases personal interviews before their request for transfer would be considered by the state (Mitchoff 3). This passive, nonviolent approach, however, was not the case for all the southern reactions.

The South also took a violent approach in resisting the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling. The classic example of this is the event known as Little Rock 9. In September 1957, Governor Orval Faubus ordered the Arkansas National Guard to prevent nine black students from entering the all-white Central High School. Opponents of desegregation threatened violence and Eisenhower had to send in federal troops to escort the nine students (Crist 3). There were often riots and violence outside of schools desegregating. When Mansfield High School tried to desegregate, Governor Shivers called the Texas Ranger to halt the desegregation attempt (Crist 4). Desegregation soon moved to more than just schools, and violence in the movement increased. Black activists like Medgar Evers, white civil rights supporters like Viola Liuzzo, and many others died in attempts to register voters, integrate facilities, and bring the national law into the South (Mitchoff 2). Also, during this time period there was a revival of the KKK. They believed in white supremacy and were responsible for the bombing of the 16th Street Baptist Church in Birmingham. Innocent children were killed in this bombing showing the absolute ruthlessness in the South as a reaction to the Brown case. As a result of the bombing and violence, Birmingham earned the nickname “Bombingham” (Mitchoff 2). Both the passive and the violent reactions of the South after the Brown decision effected the enforcement.

The South was responsible for the delay in the enforcement of the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* ruling. As a result of the South simply not following the ruling, a second part to the decision was added on one year later, known as *Brown II*. This said desegregation must be done “with all deliberate speed” (Barnhill 4). Yet the South still followed their idea of massive resistance and there was an even further delay as a result. It wasn’t till twelve years later that blacks were able to attend “white” schools, with Little Rock 9 (Littlejohn 1). “A decade after the *Brown* case was decided, only a small percent of the nation’s schools had been successfully integrated” (Barnhill 2). Some believe that “despite *Brown’s* commitment to equality, black and other minority students in many regions of the country continue to receive a lower-quality education than do more privileged white students” (Barnhill 2). How effective the case was is debatable, but the South, with their massive resistance philosophy, did delay and weaken the enforcement of the ruling.

The ruling of the *Brown v. Board of Education of Topeka* trial immediately brought great anger to the South. As a result, the South started their policy of massive resistance against the case. This policy took the form of written or passive behaviors as well as violent actions. These actions taken by the South resulted in a delaying and lack of enforcement for the Court’s ruling.

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